

The Development of Personal, Intercultural and Professional Competence in International Field Experience in Initial Teacher Education

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This paper reports a qualitative case study of four preservice student teachers' professional learning experiences in an international field experience programme situated in the language and cultural immersion component of a PGDE(Primary) Programme in Hong Kong. Two of the student teachers undertook the international field experience in Australia and Canada. The other two had their "non-local" field experience in mainland China¹. The findings reveal student teachers' development in personal and intercultural competence in cross-cultural experiences. Their professional learning experiences in the action context, socio-professional context, and supervisory context of the cross-cultural school settings, and their reflection upon these experiences constituted the development of their professional competence. Suggestions for improvement of the international field experience programme and implications for future research are discussed.

Key Words: initial teacher education, international field experience, student teachers, student teaching, professional learning

"Second language use in cross-cultural instructional settings is a means of preparing preservice teachers for teaching in the 21st century" (Ward & Ward, 2003, p. 536). "To meet the needs of the 21st century, schools must successfully teach many more students from increasingly diverse backgrounds while preparing them for a much more complex, interdependent world that most teachers themselves are not familiar with. Consequently, the nature of teacher preparation and the settings in which students learn to teach must undergo substantial change." (Cushner & Mahon, 2002, p. 45). International field experience, ranging from a few days'

experience to a year-long internship, offers preservice student teachers professional learning experiences in settings beyond the culture of their home country.

This paper attempts to explore student teachers' learning experiences in international field experience in the context of a language and cultural immersion programme. The review of relevant literature on cross-cultural experiences, international field experience and student teachers' professional learning in fieldwork sets a framework for the exploration of student teachers' experiences in familiar and unfamiliar cultural settings. It is hoped that this examination of student teachers' development of personal, intercultural and professional competence during international field experience will contribute to the ongoing academic discourse on international field experience in the literature on teacher education.

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Student Teachers' Experiences in International Field Experience

In broad terms, international field experience in initial teacher education (ITE) refers to the process in which a student

teacher gradually becomes a competent teacher through cross-cultural experiences (including school experiences) in settings beyond the culture of his / her home country. A review of the relevant literature on the features of international field experience programmes, and the presentation of a theoretical frame for examining cross-cultural experiences set the backdrop for the inquiry. On the basis of this backdrop, the literature on the impact of international field experience on student teachers' development of personal, intercultural and professional competence, and the features of field experience settings are reviewed. The review of various banks of literature informs our inquiry into student teachers' experiences in international field experience.

International Field Experience Situated in ITE Programmes

Situated in different teacher education programmes, which operate within certain structural and institutional parameters, as well as carry varied conceptual orientations, international field experience varies greatly in content; duration; timing within the ITE programme; its linkage with other components of the ITE programme; the roles and responsibilities of higher education and school personnel in the countries involved. Despite such differences, most international field experience carries either one or both of the following goals: 1. the preparation of second / foreign language teachers; and 2. the preparation of teachers to teach in multi-cultural contexts (Baker & Rosalie, 2000; Davcheva, 2002; Ferry & Konza, 2001; Kuechle, Ferguson & O'Brien, 1995; Hill & Thomas, 2002).

To achieve these goals, international field experience programmes often include most of the following components: a language course (Bodycott & Crew, 2001; Myers, 1996, 1997), cultural immersion activities (Myers, 1996, 1997), residence with host family or hostel (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Mahan & Stachowski, 1990) and classroom teaching. For classroom teaching, student teachers in different international field experience programmes may be involved in a range of teaching activities, e.g. acting as assistant to classroom teacher (Byram, 1994; Myers, 1996, 1997), teaching overseas children about student teachers' home cultures (Davcheva, 2002), teaching English-based lessons to promote cultural exchange (Ferry & Konza, 2001), being exposed to innovative teaching approaches (Williams & Kelleher, 1987). Apart from the above, service learning is another theme which exists in certain international field experience programmes (Stachowski & Visconti, 1998).

Studies on Cross-cultural Experiences

The literature on the various aspects of cross-cultural experiences is voluminous. Heyward (2002) traces the changing focus of studies on cross-cultural experiences, ranging from early studies of cultural adjustment to more recent research on intercultural learning. Taylor (1994, p. 154) defines intercultural competency as an "adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative world view which allows participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture". He puts forward a learning model as an alternative to research on intercultural competency that has tended to focus on identifying characteristics of successful intercultural experiences and / or developing a model of how it should be conceptualized. In his model, six components which reflect the long-term process of learning to become interculturally competent are identified, namely setting the stage, cultural disequilibrium, nonreflective orientation, reflective orientation, behavioural learning strategies, and evolving intercultural identity. Heyward (2002, p. 10) presents a multidimensional model for the development of intercultural literacy, in which intercultural literacy is defined as "the understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for successful cross-cultural engagement". He portrays the development of intercultural literacy as an empowering additive process in terms of levels of development².

Heyward's (2002) portrayal of the complexity of cross-cultural experiences and identification of the six dimensions of intercultural literacy provide a framework for our exploration of student teachers' experiences in international field experience. Taylor's (1994) elaboration on learning strategies, i.e. learning as an observer, as a participant, and as a friend, enriches our understanding of the extent of participation in cross-cultural experiences. He also highlights the importance of recognizing the participants' array of prior experiences reflected in former critical events, personal goals, education, and previous intercultural experiences they brought with them. These aspects of Heyward (2002) and Taylor's (1994) work are of reference value to the current study of student teachers' experience in international field experience, though we must be aware that these models depict long-term development and learning while the international field experience in the current study is of a much shorter duration.

Student Teachers' Development of Personal and Intercultural Competence in International Field Experience

Research on overseas student teaching reveals that student teachers learn a significant amount in terms of personal, global / intercultural and professional competence (Cushner & Mahon, 2002), though all of these competence areas can be affected by the duration, the objectives and the content of the international field experience programmes. In terms of personal growth, student teachers experience general maturity and independence, have greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as develop increased confidence and a stronger sense of self. An increased acceptance of others and heightened efficacy in working with others are also developed (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Wilson, 1993). Student teachers in Stachowski and Visconti's (1998) study developed sense of belongings within their host community and positive attitude towards volunteering in the future.

Heyward's (2002) identification of understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities sets the backdrop for the examination of student teachers' development of intercultural competence. In terms of understanding, Wilson (1993) argues that student teachers develop substantive knowledge, including knowledge of other cultures and a general awareness of world issues. The overseas host country context itself is the most valuable resource for language learning in its broadest sense (Crew & Bodycott, 2001) and functional interaction in authentic settings facilitates the enhancement of language abilities (notably fluency and confidence), and new insights into teaching methodology (McKay, Bowyer, & Kerr, 2001). Student teachers show improvement in language proficiency in terms of communicative competence, more extensive use and greater confidence to communicate in English during language immersion (Connelly, 2001; Evans, Alano, & Wong, 2001; Murdoch & Adamson, 2001). As for adjustment to cross-cultural experience and construction of cultural identities, Byram (1994) reports student teachers' experience of culture shock, cultural adaptation and the problematization of one's cultural identity. Cushner and Mahon (2002) argue for student teachers' increased intercultural sensitivity in terms of Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) in which denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and integration are identified as stages of awareness of cultural difference. In terms of attitude, Willard-Holt (2001) finds that student teachers are less prone to prejudge pupils based on cultural background, linguistic difference or learning disability. Increased global mindedness, propensity towards global education, and a more global perspective in teaching are also found (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Willard-Holt, 2001).

Student Teachers' Development of Professional Competence in International Field Experience

Apart from personal and intercultural competence, student teachers' professional competence can be enhanced as international field experience provides an accrument of new skills, strategies, attitudes, and knowledge to bring back to classrooms in their home country (Mahan & Stachowski, 1989). In a broad sense, they can compare and contrast different school systems (Clement & Outlaw, 2002). They acquire new attitudes and beliefs to test against the realities of the education system in their home country (Quinn et al., 1995). Vall and Tennison (1991-1992) argue that student teachers become more reflective about their taken-for-granted assumptions and behaviours, and more active in problem-posting and actual experimentation of alternatives. Other studies of international field experience share the view that student teachers develop and try out new approaches of teaching. Williams and Kellecher (1987) find that student teachers become sympathetic to the implementation of innovation and change in schools in which they eventually teach as a result of being exposed to innovative teaching approaches like individualizing instruction, integrated day / thematic teaching, development of classroom learning centres. Davcheva (2002) informs student teachers' development of intercultural teaching and learning disposition and their learning of new approaches in designing intercultural teaching materials. Stachowski and Visconti (1998) also report student teachers' commitment to make service learning a part of the curriculum in their future classrooms.

While studies of student teachers' development of professional competence can inform the current study, the literature on professional learning in field experience enriches our understanding of student teachers' professional learning in field experience settings in cross-cultural contexts. Tang (2003) argues that student teachers' personal-professional development takes place in the action context (Eraut, 1994); the socio-professional context (McNally, Cope, Inglis & Stronach, 1997); and the supervisory context (Slick, 1998). The action context refers to classrooms in which student teachers are introduced to the complex nature of learning-to-teach. In the socio-professional context, student teachers' interact with various agents, including teachers, fellow student teachers or peers and other personnel in the wider school life. Wang (2001) studies the interaction between mentors and student teachers at the interpersonal level. She highlights that the interaction between teachers and student teachers varies in the length and frequency of the interaction, the place where they interact, as well as the topics in the interaction. Britton,

Pain, Pimm and Raizen's (2003) study of teacher induction in different countries illuminates the way in which these mentoring practices differ across countries and that the varied mentoring cultures are embedded in different school and curriculum contexts across various cultural settings. Their study illustrates that mentoring practices orient novice teachers to get into a relatively public culture of teaching in certain places, e.g., Shanghai, and a relatively private culture of teaching in some other places, e.g., Lucern and Bern. While student teachers engage in ongoing interaction with the action context and socio-professional context during the field experience, they come into contact with tertiary supervisors in the latter's occasional visits in the supervisory context. Student teachers' experiences in these three facets of the field experience context contribute to their professional development as a teacher.

The Inquiry of Student Teachers' Experiences in International Field Experience

The review of the current literature sets the framework for a qualitative multi-case study of four student teachers' experiences in an international field experience programme. On the one hand, the four cases took place in the different linguistic and cultural contexts of China and Canada / Australia. On the other hand, as we shall see later, the cases also differed in terms of student teachers' immersion in a familiar and an unfamiliar cultural setting. The inquiry involves exploring student teachers' development of personal and intercultural competence and how this might contribute to the development of their professional competence. Student teachers' development of professional competence is further examined with respect to their professional learning experiences in the action context, socio-professional context, and supervisory context of the international field experience settings.

The Research Setting: The International Field Experience in

the Immersion Programme

The international field experience reported in this study is situated in the context of a language and cultural immersion programme. The immersion programme takes place at the end of the First Semester in a One-Year Postgraduate Diploma in Primary Education (PGDE) Programme offered by a teacher education institution in Hong Kong. Student teachers in the PGDE Programme take two subjects as their teaching specialisms—Teaching Subject Study 1 and 2 (TSS1 and TSS2). The immersion programme is compulsory for student teachers who have English Language or Putonghua (Mandarin) as their TSS1. It consists of three components. Firstly, language enhancement works including language class and communication with native speakers are arranged. Secondly, cultural activities such as field trips and outings are organized for the purpose of cultural immersion. Thirdly, in-school field experience is provided. Participants are required to take part in classroom observation, curriculum and lesson planning as well as individual or team teaching, with the support of mentor teachers in the schools they are placed. The Contracting Centres, i.e. higher education institutions (HEIs) in the host countries / cities, are responsible for organizing the activities. Prior to the immersion programme, a two-day orientation programme is arranged by the faculty of these HEIs for student teachers in Hong Kong. In the host countries / cities, the faculty of the HEIs teach the language classes. They also pay visits to student teachers, observe their teaching and give advice to them during the in-school field experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

Table 1 shows the information about the four student teachers who had different subjects in the PGDE programme and undertook the immersion programme in different parts of the world. The features of the cases give possible comparison of the cultural settings in the English and Putonghua

Table 1. *Summary of the four student teachers' information*

Student teacher*	Sex	Teaching Subject Study 1 (TSS1)	Teaching Subject Study 2 (TSS2)	City for international field experience
Stephen	M	English Language	Civic Education	Toronto, Canada
Jessie	F	English Language	Putonghua (Mandarin)	Brisbane, Australia
Sally	F	Putonghua (Mandarin)	Chinese Language	Xi'an, mainland China
May	F	Putonghua (Mandarin)	Information Technology	Xi'an, mainland China

Note. *Names used are pseudonyms

Immersion Programmes. As we shall see later, the cases also provide room for comparing the experiences of student teachers undertaking immersion programmes in familiar and unfamiliar cultural settings.

Programme documents were collected to provide a general understanding of the features of and student teachers' experiences in the immersion programme. The first author participated in meetings with the faculty of the Contracting Centres to gain specific understanding of the immersion programme settings in different places³. Interviews were conducted with student teachers before the immersion programme to seek understanding of their biography and background. Two in-depth interviews were conducted, one immediately after the immersion programme and another during the second teaching block in Hong Kong, to investigate student teachers' experiences in the immersion programme and the impact of such experiences on their later experiences in the local field experience. Chinese was the language used in the interviews and the transcription of interview data.

Upon reading and memoing, the coded data in each case were clustered with reference to student teachers' development of personal and intercultural competence, as well as their professional learning experiences in the action context, socio-professional context and supervisory context in the international field experience programme, and their reflections on these learning experiences. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), patterns of student teachers' experiences in the different international field experience settings were identified.

What follows is a brief sketch of Stephen and Jessie's experiences in the English Immersion Programme and May and Sally's experiences in the Putonghua Immersion Programme respectively. The portrait of the different features of the immersion programmes provides a backdrop for the exploration into student teachers' development of personal, intercultural and professional competence. The interview data, initially transcribed in Chinese, were translated into English when presented in this paper.

Stephen and Jessie in the English Immersion Programme: Cross-cultural Experiences in an Unfamiliar Cultural Setting

Stephen and Jessie undertook the English Immersion Programme in an unfamiliar cultural setting. Both of them were brought up and educated in Hong Kong and English is not their mother tongue. The English Immersion Programme provided them with the first chance of having close contact with other cultures and encountering other school systems.

They undertook the international field experience in the English Immersion Programme in Toronto and Brisbane respectively. Each of them was placed in a group of nineteen student teachers with a Contracting Centre in November and December 2002. Residence in a host family was arranged and student teachers had homestay accommodation on their own. Each Centre organized language classes, school visits and teaching placements in a few schools, and cultural activities for student teachers. The teaching placements, in terms of actual classroom teaching opportunity, varied across Centres and countries. Stephen had rich classroom teaching experience in English Language, Social Studies and Mathematics in the integrated primary curriculum setting in Toronto. Jessie had comparatively little teaching experience in Brisbane. To student teachers, one major difference in these overseas educational settings was the subject-oriented primary curriculum in Hong Kong and the integrated curriculum in overseas primary schools.

Sally and May in the Putonghua Immersion Programme: Cross-cultural Experiences in a Familiar Cultural Setting

Sally and May's immersion experience took place in a cultural setting which was familiar to them. Both of them were born in mainland China and Putonghua is their mother tongue⁴. Sally went to primary and secondary school in Chengdu and went to university in Beijing while May was schooled up to Secondary 4 in Nanjing and then had her senior secondary and university education in Hong Kong. They had their cross-cultural field experience in a Putonghua (or Mandarin) Immersion Programme in Xi'an. Given the fact that both of them were brought up and experienced school education in mainland China, the Immersion programme was not a totally new encounter of the culture and school system of mainland China, as compared to their fellow student teachers who had been brought up in Hong Kong. In a group of twenty-two student teachers, Sally and May participated in the six-week immersion programme, whilst staying in the university hostel, in November and December 2002. In the first two weeks, they joined a series of social and cultural activities for the understanding of the relationships among Putonghua language, local history, cultural norms and eating habits in the host province. The Putonghua language enhancement component of the immersion programme focused on language training. Tests were administered to assess the student teachers' language proficiency. The in-school field experience consisted of a two-week practice of Putonghua teaching (TSS1) at a county level primary school located in the

suburbs, and another two weeks focusing on the teaching of the student teachers' second subject (TSS2) in the primary school in the HEI in the city. Sally taught Chinese Language while May taught Information Technology in the second school. To student teachers, one of the major differences in the cross-cultural educational setting was that Putonghua was a "second language" subject in Hong Kong while it was incorporated in Chinese Language lessons in Xi'an, with Putonghua being the mother tongue in most parts of mainland China.

Student Teachers' Development of Personal and Intercultural Competence

The cross-cultural experiences provided opportunities for student teachers to experience personal growth and develop intercultural competence. Heyward's dimensions of intercultural literacy and relevant concepts of Taylor's model of learning to become culturally competent inform our understanding of student teachers' development of intercultural competence.

Personal Growth

The uncertainty generated by living in an unfamiliar environment in the six-week immersion programme provided chances for personal growth. Sally experienced personal growth in terms of developing greater will power and heightened efficacy in working with others. Jessie experienced personal growth in terms of increased confidence and a stronger sense of self. This was important to both her development as a person and as a teacher.

Living conditions were poor... low temperature, and I had to leave my family so I missed them very much. Sometimes I had to think more positively. [This experience] helps me develop will power.... In addition I have to learn how to work along with others since I don't live with my classmates in Hong Kong. In the immersion programme we went out of Hong Kong and lived together [in a hostel]. I was the class representative so I needed to take on more responsibilities. To tell the truth, this is training for me. (Interview with Sally after the Putonghua Immersion)

Before going on the immersion programme, I worried about many problems, like difficulties in adaptation and communication as well as comparisons being made between other classmates and myself.... I could use English to fully express myself and I could overcome the living problems.... The immersion programme strengthened my confidence and I

recognized my own capability. I know that I am comparable to my classmates and they are not particularly smart. (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

Language Proficiency

The impact of international field experience on language proficiency varied in accordance to the biographical background of student teachers. As Putonghua was the mother tongue of Sally and May, they did not experience as much improvement in language competence during the immersion, as compared to other fellow student teachers in the same programme. Nevertheless, significant benefits have been recognized in the cases of Stephen and Jessie. The earlier example of Jessie showed that her growing confidence was partly built on her improvement in language proficiency in terms of communicative competence, more extensive use and greater confidence to communicate in English.

I must speak in English in the class and at home, although I communicated with my classmates using Chinese. English language competence improved as I spoke and listened to more English.... More communications [in daily life] did help improve my English.... including both listening and oral English. (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

Participation in and Understanding of Cross-cultural Experiences

Student teachers' varied participation in cross-cultural experiences provided opportunities for them to develop different levels of understanding of the host culture. In the immersion programme, they developed a general understanding of the culture of the host country through being an observer in cultural activities. Stephen's tour around Toronto gave him a general cross-cultural understanding of the host culture. Sally also expressed the importance of cultural knowledge to the development of her professional competence as a Putonghua and Chinese Language teacher.

I know more about the culture of Canada, or their places of interest, the famous architectures in their community. I visited the places, and made contact with people.... Most of them are very polite, like other foreigners. (Interview with Stephen after the English Immersion)

Xi'an is an ancient city. In terms of cultural knowledge, I have learnt a lot of things and understood more about Chinese history.... I teach both Putonghua and Chinese Language.... Other than subject matter knowledge, we have to teach pupils Chinese cultural knowledge as well, which helps enhancing

their sense of national identity. It is difficult to exert influence on pupils if the teacher doesn't know much about Chinese culture. (Interview with Sally after the Putonghua Immersion)

The form of residence varied across the English and Putonghua Immersion Programmes. Student teachers in the Putonghua Immersion Programme stayed with their fellow classmates from Hong Kong in university hostels. Student teachers in the English Immersion Programme had greater cross-cultural engagement through their homestay in host families. The interpersonal dynamics in Stephen and Jessie's cases illustrated that Taylor's (1994) learning strategies of "being a participant" and "being a friend" in cross-cultural experiences. Stephen's homestay gave him a general cross-cultural understanding of an "adapted" Jewish culture in Canada. Jessie's homestay gave her an understanding of the difference in family pattern and child-rearing method between the host culture and Hong Kong. Jessie developed friendship with the host mum in her homestay. She recognized the importance of being active in developing friendship in a cross-cultural context.

I chose a homestay and my host is a Jewish. He does not celebrate Christmas but Hanukkah [Festival of Lights]. It's another kind of culture. But he is not a very earnest Jew because what we ate was ordinary western food. (Interview with Stephen after the English Immersion)

Children do not live with their parents even though they do not get married. Also they are different from that in Hong Kong. They are not over-protected by their parents. (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

I lived with my host mum and host dad. They have a son, altogether there are three people in my host family. The one I had contact with most was my host mum. She was kind and friendly.... My host mum often receives foreign students. I am her twelfth "student". There was nothing new for her. I need to be active.... Yes, this is a reward. I developed a good relationship with my host family. This is an unforgettable experience. (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

Though the homestay arrangement provided an opportunity for living in another culture, the extent of student teachers' participation in another culture was constrained by the lack of time for cross-cultural interaction. Both Stephen and Jessie expressed regret that they lacked time to have more in-depth interaction with local people and local culture during the immersion due to very heavy workload in assignments. Their experiences reflected the constraint on the enhancement of

student teachers' intercultural competence due to the limitation of the immersion programme.

At the beginning I tried to talk more to the host. Later I had to deal with the heavy workload therefore we did not talk much at all. I feel sorry about this. I would talk more to him if I had time.... I didn't talk much to the Korean student as we both closed our doors when we came back. (Interview with Stephen after the English Immersion)

Six weeks was a short period and we were overwhelmed by the heavy workload, such as weekly journal, reports.... It (heavy workload) hindered my communication with local people and deprived me of opportunities to know more about that place because I had to stay at home to do homework. Therefore I had limited chances to communicate with the host mum. Besides, watching TV is also vital as it is a good opportunity to learn English [but I just lacked the time to do so]. (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

Attitudes and Identity Development in Cross-cultural Experiences

Though the immersion period was not long, a couple of cases illustrated that student teachers might develop certain attitudes towards cross-cultural differences and insights about their own cultural identities. Jessie's awareness of the different degree of cleanliness between Westerners and Chinese taking into account of urban-suburb differences and socio-economic factors illustrated that her attitude towards cultural difference was based on a rather sophisticated understanding of intergroup aspects of culture. We shall further illustrate this increasingly sophisticated understanding of intergroup aspects of culture when we examine Jessie's experience in teaching supervision later in this paper. Jessie's experience of "living with" the host culture was illustrated in her development of skills of communicating with people in the host cultural setting. She adopted a different "greeting repertoire" in which she behaved in a way appropriate to the Australian culture without threatening the integrity or existence of her own cultural identity.

I have an impression that Westerners are more concerned about cleanliness and hygiene than Chinese. This may be affected by their living conditions and family background. The majority of Westerners live in villages or small towns. (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

I tried to adapt to their culture, be assimilated and be more enthusiastic. For example when I went to school or come back,

I would say “I’m home!”, “I’m leaving!” etc. When I went to the supermarket with my host family and met my classmates, I felt warm and we hugged each other. This would not happen when I am in Hong Kong..... I think this is a friendly and enthusiastic way of expression, when compared with saying hello and goodbye. This feeling is closer. (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

Interestingly, May’s experience in Xi’an made her become aware of her “mainland China born” cultural identity which was different from that of her fellow classmates who were born in Hong Kong. Her biographical background of being brought up in mainland China and her hostel accommodation with fellow classmates in Xi’an gave her new insights about the difference between herself and Hong Kong students who were brought up in different cultural settings.

I think I know more and have greater interest [in Chinese history] than them [i.e. my classmates brought up in Hong Kong]. For example, I watched Phoenix Satellite TV when I was in Xi’an. Every Saturday there is a TV programme called “A Date with Lu Yu” on Phoenix TV, which is about interviews with certain famous artists in mainland China.... They [the artists] talked about their experience in the Cultural Revolution, their upbringing in mainland China and most of them went abroad later... They [my classmates] think this kind of programme is boring, or they simply don’t have any idea about this programme. (Interview with May after the Putonghua Immersion)

Student Teachers’ Development of Professional Competence

The previous analysis reveals that student teachers experienced personal growth and developed awareness of sense of self as a cultural being in the immersion programme. The development of intercultural competence might become a basis for student teachers’ development of their professional competence as a language teacher.

The in-school field experience during the immersion programme offered opportunities for student teachers’ development of their professional competence. The field experience settings in the different cultural contexts of the English and Putonghua Immersion Programmes constituted varied professional learning experiences in the action context, socio-professional context and supervisory context for student teachers. The professional competence developed during the international field experience had varied linkages with student teachers’ later professional learning experiences in Hong Kong

school settings.

Professional Learning in the Action Context

Given the integrated primary curriculum setting in Toronto and Brisbane, Stephen and Jessie’s professional learning in the action context was confined to “single-class” experiences. Sally and May undertook their in-school field experience in a very different setting in Xi’an as compared to Toronto and Brisbane. The cohort placement of student teachers in two different schools for their TSS1 and TSS2, and the subject-based primary curriculum setting contributed to the very different professional learning experiences in the action context. While the difference in cultural settings constituted different encounters for the student teachers, the authentic teaching experience in class settings contributed to their professional development as a teacher.

Professional Learning in Integrated Curriculum Class Settings in the English Immersion Programme. Stephen had quite extensive classroom experience in teaching English Language, Mathematics, and Social Studies in an integrated curriculum setting in Canada, which is very different from the subject-based setting in Hong Kong. He taught a Grade 2 class with pupils from multicultural backgrounds. His classroom experience provided opportunity for him to encounter the realities of classroom life. He felt that pupils were very different from those he met in Hong Kong, and this implied an attribution of pupil classroom behaviour to cultural difference. He found classroom management a challenge to him in real classroom contexts. Jessie had limited classroom teaching experience in which she taught English Language and Putonghua, as it was a time near summer vacation in Australia. She found this limited professional learning experience inadequate for her development in classroom teaching competence.

I think the pupils there like to express themselves, raise their hands and ask questions, and are also more active. In contrast to pupils in Hong Kong, they do not follow the teacher’s instructions or suggestions. Just like what I’ve said, they like giving opinions so it was difficult to control classroom order. (Interview with Stephen after the English Immersion)

The host teacher asked me to teach two lessons... one lesson was about listening, and I taught Putonghua in another lesson, teaching things like counting one, two, three, and four. There was another lesson about introducing Hong Kong. Only the listening lesson involved teaching English. In the so-called listening lesson, I read aloud the passage so the pupils listened to my instructions and drew something on the paper, such as straight lines and stars.... Actually there is no significant

improvement in my teaching since there were too few lessons [for teaching practice] and the teaching content was not relevant. (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

Professional Learning in Subject-based Class Settings in the Putonghua Immersion Programme. Sally and May taught in the same school settings and each of them had independent teaching of TSS1 and TSS2 preceeded by micro-teaching. They had very different professional learning experiences in different class settings. Sally's professional learning in the action context was characterized by satisfaction derived from effective teaching and learning. She attributed this to the rather predictable action context which allowed the smooth implementation of her teaching plan.

I was satisfied; I think it's OK in general. Many things were expected and happened smoothly. The opinions of the mentor teacher and the supervisor were good. But I think there were a number of factors behind the success, not only because of myself. The children were nice and cooperative. All these contributed to my success. (Interview with Sally after the Putonghua Immersion)

May had authentic experience of arranging the first Information Technology class for pupils in the action context. She was overwhelmed by the hectic realities of kids facing novelties in an Information Technology class.

The second time I taught a Primary One class... Pupils were very noisy. They hadn't entered the computer room before. I had to arrange them to enter the room and let them play the games. They were very excited. I was quite worried so I said seriously, 'Don't move anything.'... But I was very frightened at that moment. Why did the kids want to touch everything? They were noisy so I would think they were out of control. (Interview with May after the Putonghua Immersion)

This classroom reality shock can be viewed through the cultural lens. Given May's previous schooling experience in mainland China, the in-school experience in Xi'an was a placement in a familiar cultural setting when compared to her fellow classmates' experiences. Yet May realized that the regular teacher's attitude towards pupils' discipline changed dramatically, and this was markedly different from her own childhood experience. She was shocked that the regular teacher allowed pupils to talk loudly in class as this was definitely intolerable when she was a child. The placement in a familiar cultural setting turned out to offer "unfamiliar" classroom experience to May in her learning-to-teach journey, and this engendered reflection on the issue of classroom

management.

Professional Learning in the Socio-professional Context

Stephen and Jessie's professional learning in the single-class action context in Toronto and Brisbane coincided with their close interaction with the school mentor, i.e. the host teacher of the class in the socio-professional context. The rather "individualistic" mentoring experience they experienced contrasted with Sally and May's experiences in a more "collectivistic" mentoring culture in Xi'an.

Professional learning in an "Individualistic" Mentoring Setting in the English Immersion Programme. Parallel to the integrated curriculum setting in Toronto and Brisbane, Stephen and Jessie's interaction with the socio-professional context was confined to the close interaction with a host teacher in single-class settings. They had numerous opportunities of classroom observation and professional dialogue with the host teacher. This represents a rather individualistic mentoring relationship between the host teacher and the student teacher concerned. Stephen learned a lot of practical knowledge about teaching from his host teacher. Vivid examples of positive reinforcement, which was very different from Stephen's preconceptions of teacher-pupil interaction, were observed. Jessie appreciated the "all-roundedness" of her host teacher. Both of them realized that effective teaching involved "many tricks" to engage pupils in learning. Apart from close interaction with the host teacher, sharing of experience and teaching materials among peers beyond the single-class settings was evidenced.

I learnt a lot from the host teacher, such as classroom management or ways to arouse pupils' interest. Moreover, they tend to encourage pupils a lot, like they give lots of encouragement when they appreciate pupils. They will not directly say that the pupil is not good or give punishment even when he or she hasn't done the task well. The poor pupils will learn from the good pupils when the teachers appreciate the latter. The teachers are likely to exercise positive reinforcement....(Interview with Stephen after the English Immersion)

The host teacher is an "all-rounder" because he or she teaches all subjects, such as personal development, dancing and singing. He or she has to teach every subject including languages so his/her relationship with the pupils is closer. The teachers in Australia are just like artists. Besides the teaching subject, other knowledge has to be developed since childhood.... (Interview with Jessie after the English Immersion)

We would discuss about how to teach, for example I exchanged the teaching materials with one of my friends who taught the same grade as me.... [There was no peer observation as we had to stay in our own classrooms.].... we had to take care of our own class.... We usually chatted after school. We talked about what happened in the class, how to deal with pupils if they are noisy, how to encourage pupils. (Interview with Stephen after the English Immersion)

Apart from interaction with mentors and peers, experience in the school setting in another culture broadened student teachers' horizons on education. Stephen recognized the differences in various aspects of the Canadian and HK school systems.

While there are two examinations in a semester in Hong Kong, it is not true over there. Activities are more emphasized and more importantly, they stress the importance of reading. On average, there will be a reading lesson every two days and [pupils will] go to the library to borrow books. The bookcases are filled with books and pupils read those books when there is spare time in the lesson. Pupils like books and do not refuse reading. They read books and write reading reports once their teacher asks them to do so. The reading atmosphere is much stronger than Hong Kong.... I think they devote a lot of resources. Even there is only one pupil, they provide extra care, although the pupil does not pay additional money. I think the school is willing to take extra care of special needs pupils. At the same time, [the arrangement of] the language subject is interesting. ESL pupils go to another classroom to have their language lesson, perhaps helping them to strengthen their language ability. (Interview with Stephen after the English Immersion)

Professional Learning in a "Collectivistic" Mentoring Setting in the Putonghua Immersion Programme. The placement in two schools and in different classes on subject basis and the culture of "public lessons" in schools provided extensive classroom observation experiences for Sally and May in Xi'an. In contrast to Stephen and Jessie's experiences with more individualistic mentoring relationships, this rather collectivist mentoring culture in Xi'an allowed Sally and May to get in touch with the practical knowledge of different teachers. To Sally, getting in touch with different teachers' practical knowledge in a "public" culture of teaching was a valuable experience in her learning-to-teach journey.

We could observe the public lessons conducted by competent teachers. We noticed that different teachers have their teaching styles even though they teach the same subjects and grade levels. For questioning techniques, some teachers may ask

extremely difficult questions that students may not fully understand. On the other hand, teachers adopt inductive questioning can help their students to understand what the question is about. This experience, in fact affects my professional development and use of teaching strategies. (Interview with Sally after the Putonghua Immersion).

Professional Learning in the Supervisory Context

Student teachers' experiences in the supervisory context also contributed to their professional learning. The different teaching supervisors' practices in the supervisory context probably mirrored our previous examination of the more "individualistic" mentoring setting in the English Immersion Programme as compared to the more "collectivistic" mentoring setting in Xi'an. Apart from the cultural difference in supervisory settings, cultural difference was observed in the supervisory style of teaching supervisors.

"Individualistic" and "Collectivistic" Supervisory Contexts in the English and Putonghua Immersion Programmes. In the English Immersion Programme, Stephen's example illustrated that the tertiary supervisors of the Contracting Centre gave valuable input and useful feedback on his teaching, probably on an individual basis. In the Putonghua Immersion Programme, Sally experienced the tertiary supervisors' arrangement of progressive learning-to-teach opportunities for student teachers to develop their professional competence in classroom teaching. Student teachers prepared their lesson plans with the guidance of the tertiary supervisor. The engagement in micro-teaching in the university setting prepared student teachers for teaching in authentic settings. Cohort placement allowed collaborative professional learning activities, like joint lesson planning, to take place. This way of preparing student teachers for teaching in authentic settings shared a common feature of the "collectivistic" mentoring setting mentioned earlier – the orientation of student teachers into the "public" culture of teaching.

They gave us a lot of comments, and they were very kind.... I was given an evaluation report after the lesson observation. The supervisor made comments for each point and those comments filled up one A4 paper. The supervisors spent considerable efforts on us and were really kind. They helped us doing preparation. (Interview with Stephen after the English Immersion)

The supervisors of the university were very helpful. In the form of "collective trial lesson", they required us to try out our lesson plan in front of our own fellow classmates at the

university. We were divided into groups, and there were six student teachers in our group. The supervisors were in our group and they gave comments to us after the micro-teaching.... Then all six of us taught primary one in the first school... We were appointed into three classes, that means two classmates in a class. [We had discussion among ourselves.] (Interview with Sally after the Putonghua Immersion)

Cultural Difference in the Supervisory Style. Jessie compared her experience in the supervisory context in the English Immersion Programme and that in the local teaching block. She was aware of the difference between Westerners and Chinese in the readiness to show appreciation to others. Instead of merely attributing the different readiness to praise others as a cultural difference between Westerners and Chinese, she interpreted that the reason for the Chinese teaching supervisors to be critical was the need to maintain the professional standards of the Institute's graduates. Jessie also noticed that Chinese mentors and teaching supervisors in the field experience context in Hong Kong had differences in the readiness to praise and encourage her. Instead of making a simplistic attribution to cultural difference, Jessie's perception probably revealed a rather sophisticated understanding of intergroup aspects of culture.

Westerners emphasize appreciation, and they tend to give positive comments and praise rather than negative comments [after lesson observation]. I am not sure whether Chinese people set high expectations. They only see negative things, and think that "to try one's best" to do something is a must or responsibility. The Chinese will only give praise when someone does something really good. The Chinese are relatively more censorious than the Westerners.... But on the other hand, I comforted myself and thought that [Chinese] teaching supervisors' high expectations came from the Institute's desire to ensure that the graduates must attain a certain standard (Interview with Jessie during the second teaching block in Hong Kong).

Apart from culture differences, there were also differences between mentors and teaching supervisors.... My performance was highly appreciated by my mentor.... Because of his appreciation, I taught my class with great confidence and seriousness. Yet the Institute teaching supervisors were different. Their comments were negative, and they gave more criticisms than appreciation. This weakened my confidence in teaching (Interview with Jessie during the second teaching block in Hong Kong).

Varied Linkage with Later Professional Learning Experiences

The previous analysis indicates that student teachers had varied professional learning experiences due to the different arrangements of the field experience settings in varied cultural contexts as well as the difference in the ways they made sense of their various encounters in these settings. The variation of professional learning experiences was further extended to how they made sense of the linkage between the international field experience and their later experiences in the teaching block in Hong Kong.

Jessie, Sally and May tended to regard the international field experience as an isolated piece of professional learning experience, without much direct linkage to their learning-to-teach experiences in the Hong Kong school context. As discussed earlier, Jessie pointed out the limited classroom experience in Brisbane constraining her development of professional competence in classroom teaching. As illustrated in the following example, Sally did not see the relevance of teaching in a different cultural setting to practices in the Hong Kong context.

Last time there was no such subject called Putonghua in China so teaching of Putonghua is the same as Chinese Language. The teaching of Putonghua and Chinese Language is totally separated this time... The linkage between the two teaching blocks is not very strong. Since we are in a hurry during the teaching practice, I haven't considered so many things.... It's different. I have totally forgotten the things in the last teaching practice [in Xi'an]. (Interview with Sally during the teaching block in Hong Kong)

In contrast, Stephen could see linkage between his experience in the international field experience and his later learning-to-teach experience in the local teaching block. He interrogated opposing orientations of teacher-pupil interaction on the basis of his experience in Toronto and the Hong Kong practices and worked out his own way of interacting with pupils.

It is difficult to maintain control and order in class using the Canadian methods. Their standard is looser, which means students are allowed to walk around the classroom. They are not required to raise their hands even before throwing rubbish - this is definitely not allowed in Hong Kong. Pupils [in Canada] can simply tell the teacher they want to go to the washroom. The teacher will not say "no" to them. In Hong Kong, I'm afraid that if I permit one pupil to go to the washroom, all pupils will have the same request.... I think I need to get a balance [on this difference in standards]. It is not necessary to choose which one is better. Sometimes we have

to scold the children if they do something wrong. The children don't know [they are wrong] if you only appreciate them. Do you still appreciate him/her if he or she behaves wrongly? So we need to get a balance between punishment and appreciation. (Interview with Stephen during the teaching block in Hong Kong)

Discussion and Conclusion

Basing itself mainly on student teachers' self-reported experiences, this paper has presented a small sample of evidence about student teachers' experiences in an international field experience programme. Though the limited sample of evidence reported in this paper cannot be generalized to student teachers' experience in other international field experience contexts, it stimulates thought on the meaning of cross-cultural experiences to individuals and the features of professional settings in cross-cultural contexts. It also triggers further thought about the role of international field experience in initial teacher education.

The "meaning" of cross-cultural experiences to individuals is critical. An important aspect of this "meaning" is the dissonance generated in cross-cultural experiences. It is not surprising to find that Stephen and Jessie's immersion in an unfamiliar cultural setting engendered some growth in their personal, intercultural and professional competence. Yet it might be illuminating to notice that May's immersion in a relatively familiar cultural setting turned out to be quite an unfamiliar experience to her. We have seen how the interaction between May's biography and her encounters in the daily life and professional settings generated a unique meaning to her. The dissonance generated in the communal life with her fellow "Hong Kong born" classmates constituted the reflection on her "mainland Chinese born" cultural identity. The dissonance caused by her classroom reality shock in the action context and the regular teacher's view towards pupil behaviour problem also drove her reflection on teacher-pupil interaction. Perhaps it is the dissonance generated in cross-cultural experiences that is critical, and this dissonance is related to how the individual makes sense of his / her encounters in cross-cultural experiences. It might be useful if appropriate guidance or support is provided to facilitate student teachers to make sense of the dissonance generated in cross-cultural encounters.

The "meaning" of cross-cultural experience to individuals is also affected by the extent of participation in cross-cultural encounters. We have illustrated student teachers' different degrees of participation as an observer, a participant and a friend with the findings of this study. Jessie's development of

an increasingly sophisticated understanding of cultural difference might be related to her active and engaging participation in cross-cultural engagement. We have also noticed that student teachers' workload other than tasks related to the immersion itself constrained the extent of their interaction with the host culture. The implications are that student teachers need to be encouraged to be active in cross-cultural engagement and that tasks / assignments unrelated to cross-cultural experiences need to be kept to a minimal level so that they can have time to really benefit from cross-cultural engagement.

Student teachers' perception of inadequate linkage between the international field experience and the later experiences in the teaching block points to the need to structure opportunities for them to make sense of how the international field experience is linked to their other professional learning experiences, rather than regarding it as an isolated piece of learning not much related to their development as a teacher in the local context. Perhaps student teachers' learning-to-teach experiences in cross-cultural professional settings with varied action contexts in different curriculum settings, mentoring and supervisory cultures can be used as a resource for cross-fertilization in their professional learning.

While the above suggestions are made to facilitate student teachers' learning and to improve the operation of the international field experience within its structural parameters, we can also rethink the role of international experience in the broader context of initial teacher education. The question entails a rethinking of international field experience with regard to its goals, duration, timing, provision of professional learning opportunities, and linkage with other course components of the initial teacher education programme. Future research on international experience involves the examination of these issues as situated in the wider context of the conceptual orientation, structural and institutional parameters of ITE programmes as well as the cultural and educational contexts of cross-cultural settings.

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Notes

1. The term "international field experience" carries two distinct meanings in this paper. For English Language student teachers, the international field experience took place in another country which offered very different cultural and educational settings from their home country. For Putonghua student teachers, the field experience took place in the north-western part of mainland China. Though the field experience took place within the same country, the cultural and educational settings were different from those in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.
2. The levels of development in Heyward's (2002) multidimensional model for the development of intercultural literacy are:
Monocultural Level 1 (limited awareness, unconsciously competent);
Monocultural Level 2 (naïve awareness, unconsciously competent);
Monocultural Level 3 (engagement-distancing, consciously incompetent);
Crosscultural Level (emerging intercultural literacy, consciously competent); and
Intercultural Level (bicultural or transcultural, unconsciously competent)
3. Being the Field Experience Co-ordinator for the local field experience of the PGDE Programme, the first author attended meetings with the faculty of Contracting Centres and other meetings related to both the English and Putonghua Immersion Programmes in Hong Kong. This provided her with specific understandings of the immersion programmes in different places.
4. In Hong Kong, Cantonese, one of the dialects of the Chinese Language, is the spoken mother tongue language of most Hong Kong born people. It is the daily language of the majority of the Hong Kong population. Putonghua (Mandarin), another dialect of the Chinese Language, is the national language of the mainland China.

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